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ABSTRACT

The inability of college students to read accurately or to write coherently is a problem. The solution lies in the classroom and with the instructors who must approach the challenge of reading and writing instruction with encouragement and excitement, remembering that the true objective is the development of students' imagination. Students must be motivated to learn and must understand the practical necessity of mastering the subjects of reading and writing. The educational process must be made effective in relation to each individual student. (JM)

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REAWAKENING THE IMAGINATION

Dr. Leslie Koltai, Chancellor
Los Angeles Community College District
English Conference, October 28, 1975

It is with great enthusiasm that I help open this conference on the Teaching of Reading and Writing. In order to approach the subject, I think first we must talk a little bit about the overall problem in the United States. As a matter of fact, the problem of English instruction...the functional illiteracy of many of our citizens ...is national in scope.

History will have to decide whether genius or madness caused us to gallop headlong into the age of mass higher education. While the pioneer trail is pursued swiftly by Canada, the USSR, and Japan... it is not unreasonable to ask why this extension of traditional elite training is being indiscriminately undertaken.

Masses of students have appeared, vast finances have been mobilized and intricate higher education structures have been provided, but no one has stopped to ask about the reason for such efforts.

In practice, for the world as a whole, which is still 60 percent illiterate, even one year's universal schooling is an extremely ambitious objective. Even in most industrialized countries only 8 years of schooling can be counted as universal because their senior secondary schools continue to be selective...and elitist.

Yes, in the United States we have created a system that supposedly provides access to anyone desiring an educational opportunity. Unfortunately, such access is useless without basic communication skills. The human imagination must have as its tool the spoken and written word. With the ability to read and write, we

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make possible all other disciplines and their explanation. The ability to manipulate language is the backbone of all human activity as we know it.

The social sciences cannot be studied without the ability to retrieve information from printed material. That constant instruction given to each of our students: "PUT IT IN YOUR OWN WORDS."...it is an instruction that commands understanding through language manipulation. The student possesses knowledge by virtue of his or her ability to successfully restructure language building blocks.

This nation's professions are kept up-to-date through a network of periodicals, reports and personal communications. In the medical field alone, there are over two million pages of technical literature produced each year.

In human relations, we often find ourselves engaged in a battle of words through an inability to clearly express goals, aspirations and personal intent. Our students are fighting such battles...battles that will not cease until they can make themselves clearly understood.

What is being said about our students? Well, according to the College Entrance Examination Board, 1975 high-school graduates bound for college posted new lows in average scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). The average scores have been declining since 1962. They were 44 points lower on the verbal part of the test than the averages scored by students in 1962. The College Board said its study of the SAT score deline shows that the ability of the test to forecast students' college grades has held up during the decline... the test has not gotten harder.

At the University of California at Berkeley, 45% of the entering freshman class required remedial work in English. This percentage must be much larger in our own community colleges. In the academic world, some are suggesting that such students are not our problem...that such students should have learned the basics in the elementary and secondary systems. I submit to you...they did not learn the basics...they are now adults...and they are very much our problem.

J. Mitchell Morse, the Temple University English professor whose writings periodically take some sharp pokes at the world of academe, said the following in the April 21, issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education,

> "I am getting graduate students of English who can't read accurately or write coherently. The knowledge of these shortcomings is sometimes kept from us with our own subconscious complicity; for the possession of accurate information carries with it a responsibility either to act or to live with the painful knowledge that we fail to act."

Ladies and gentlemen, we...here in this room...know that something has gone askew in public education. We know the magnitude of the problem that we confront. I would point out that all the statistical analysis or projection will not bring us any closer to the solution. The solution lies in the classroom...and with your ability to find new ways to teach these most basic necessities of life in a literate society.

What I am talking about is a re-awakening of our own imaginations. We must study that which has become routine...that which has become habit...that which has become mere repetition of past years. When we approach the challenge of reading and writing, it should be done with a feeling of encouragement and excitement. The lessons to be taught hold the promise of a new understanding for our students...such lessons make possible the accomplishment of all else.

Not long ago we had a young guest at my home. He stayed with my family while his parents were away for two weeks. During that time tragedy struck...the television ceased to function. I began to understand that this young man had become extremely dependent on the television as a companion. But, more than that, he had not learned to use that mental facility so essential to any kind of creative work: THE IMAGINATION. He walked about the house aimlessly... he was obviously very bored. I knew I had to do something quickly ...there is nothing more dangerous than a bored teenager.

I invited him into the study. I asked him if he would do a favor for me. I explained I needed a quotation out of Charles Dickens' Oliver Twist. Being a fairly helpful young man, he plunged into the job with dedication. Two hours later, I came back and found him still engrossed in the book. The next day he wanted to know, "if this Dickens-guy had written any other books?"

Technicolor, quadraphonic sound and three dimensional projection can never compete with the individual imagination that has been charged by a Dickens, a Hemingway, or a Fitzgerald. We may talk about the functional illiterate...or remedial programs..but we must

never lose sight of our true objective: the development of the student's imagination...through the development of language skills.

Last week some of you visited me in my office. When I asked you what your concerns were regarding the teaching of reading and writing, you responded, "Teachers who are capable of teaching the subject as well as the student." Colleges and universities used to approach their students with the philosophy that, "we offer a program of study..take it or leave it." Today, this is not feasible. If we are to pursue the goal of effective universal higher education... then we must be ready to adapt our programs to fit the student. Each individual will require attention as we begin to re-think our current approaches.

Alan Hollingsworth, Chairman of the English department at Michigan State University, made the following warning: "English will have to offer reading and writing as its work areas. If English cannot help in these areas, whatever else it can provide will soon not be wanted." We must realize that what we are teaching must relate to the student in two very important ways:

First, the student must feel a motivation to learn. Of course, this is basic to learning anything. The subject matter must touch the emotions of the student. This is what I mean by re-awakening the imagination. This is what my young friend found in Charles Dickens.

Second, the student must understand the practical necessity of the subject. One problem in many personnel departments is the large number of job applicants that are unable to successfully fill out an application. Your students will have to read and understand

credit applications. They will be faced with making political choices...choices that will hopefully be based on reading a variety of informational materials. This is the practical reality of our language.

Accomplishing these two objectives is currently being examined by John Van Allen, a professor of education at the University of Arizona. He said, "The development of reading skills and the development of listening, speaking, spelling, and writing need not be separated in the instructional program." I believe we can look to curricula involving advertising, public relations, journalism, business administration and others to provide a vehicle for English instruction.

You will notice that I have avoided talking about any particular group of students in our community colleges. I do not believe we can be concerned with only those students who are having trouble with the language tool. As we concern ourselves with remedial programs...so we should consider adding programs for all students. We must deal with the total spectrum of student abilities.

As equality of opportunity was understood in the 1950's and 1960's, both the college and society were given relatively limited roles: The role of the college was to be available to those who met its standards; that of society was to provide the funds for new colleges and for student aid. Criteria for success and failure were based on the entry of, but not necessarily the education of, the individual student.

This minimal formulation of equality of opportunity, however, turned out to be as difficult in practice as it was simple in theory.

The mass of students were given a chance to compete, but within the framework of goals and rules adapted from institutions designed to serve a much more limited group of students. Access for new students was soon followed by attrition.

To close the gap between public philosophy and educational performance, the national concern must move beyond a focus on access ...to a concern with the effectiveness of the educational process in relation to the individual.

I believe this conference is a beginning. I look to the discussions, the debates...and yes, the disagreements as being a means to a new creative tension. We have committed ourselves to universal education. It still remains to make that commitment an effective reality.